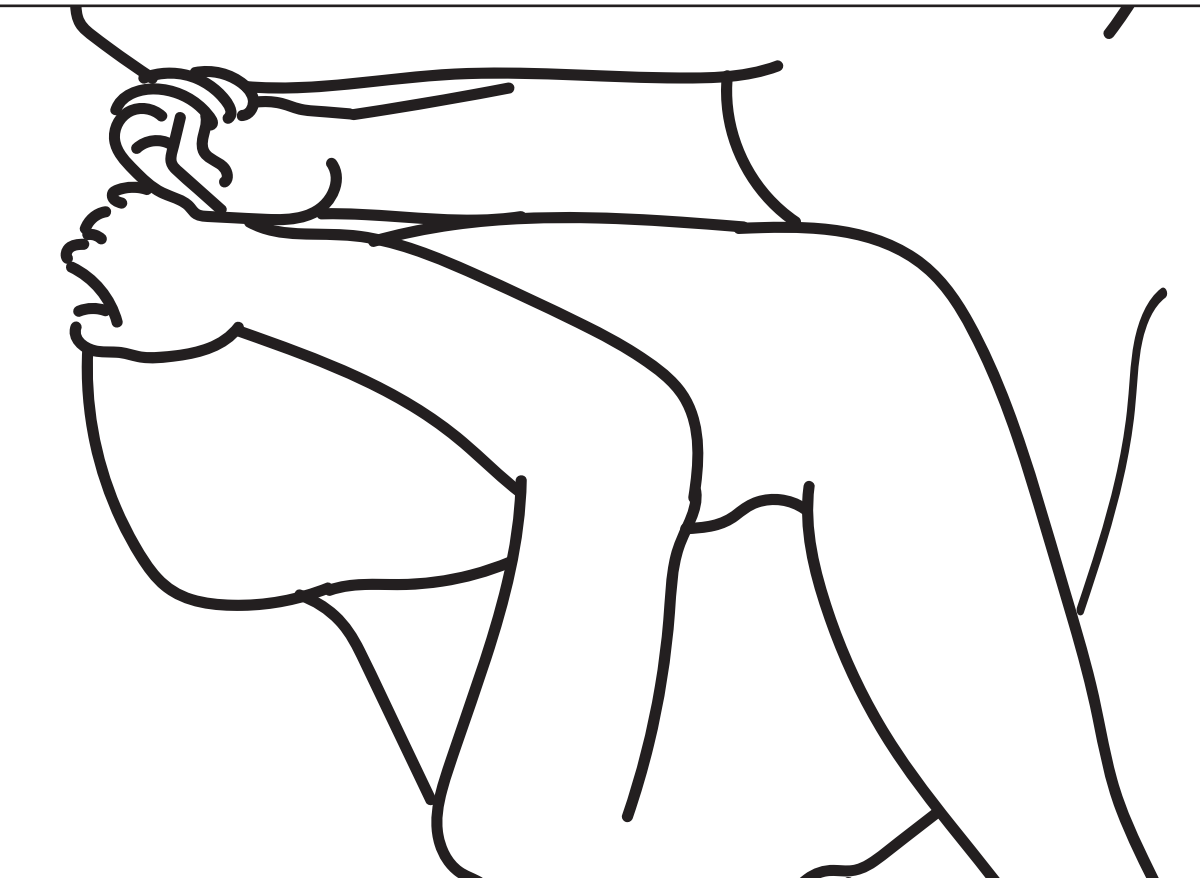
Provoc*auteurs* and Provocations

Maria San Filippo



Provoc*auteurs* and Provocations

Screening Sex in 21st Century Media

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Prologue

Tangled Up in *Blue*

> I don't want [my cinema] to resemble life. I want it to be life. I want there to be real moments of life in my films.
>
> Abdellatif Kechiche

> [Kechiche] warned us that we had to trust him—blind trust—and give a lot of ourselves. He was making a movie about passion, so he wanted to have sex scenes, but without choreography—more like *special* sex scenes. He told us he didn't want to hide the character's sexuality because it's an important part of every relationship. So he asked me if I was ready to make it, and I said, "Yeah, of course!" because I'm young and pretty new to cinema. But once we were on the shoot, I realized that he *really* wanted us to give him *everything*. Most people don't even dare to ask the things that he did, and they're more respectful—you get reassured during sex scenes, and they're choreographed, which desexualizes the act.
>
> Adèle Exarchopoulos

BY THE TIME *La vie d'Adèle* (*Blue Is the Warmest Color*, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013) reached US theaters in October 2013, it had already weathered several cycles of controversy. Early on, graphic novelist Julie Maroh protested the adaptation of her 2010 book, which provided the film's source material. Anticipatory

rumblings arose about the duration and explicitness of the film's lesbian sex scenes. And its premiere received fevered coverage at the Cannes Film Festival, where, in an unprecedented move, lead actors Adèle Exarchopoulos (whose character is also named Adèle) and Léa Seydoux (who plays Adèle's love interest-turned-girlfriend Emma) were awarded the festival's highest honor, the Palme d'Or. They received the tribute alongside Kechiche in recognition of their creative labors, which, in the view of the festival judges, made them "in a small way also the directors of the film." An exchange of recriminations ensued when Exarchopoulos and Seydoux went public soon thereafter with their objections to the filmmaker's methods. Increasingly testy exchanges developed between them and Kechiche, who eventually called (unsuccessfully) for the film's release to be canceled, claiming, "It has been soiled too much." And, finally, critics launched another round of derision and defense in the lead-up to its theatrical release.[1]

Opening in twenty-five countries, the film went on to make around $15 million worldwide—a substantial return for a foreign-language feature with a 179-minute running time and an NC-17 rating in the United States, where it was ruled ineligible on a technicality for Oscar consideration.[2] As B. Ruby Rich notes in her essay on the film for the Criterion Collection, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (hereafter, *Blue*) was a "lightning rod" at a moment when France and the United States were on the cusp of legally ensuring marriage equality. Though had it been released a few years later, *Blue* and its accompanying clashes over consent and exploitation would have been caught in the transatlantic crossfire of the #MeToo, Time's Up, and #BalanceTonPorc movements.[3]

Controversy around the film continues to resurface sporadically: when the Criterion Collection released DVD and Blu-ray editions to coincide with Valentine's Day 2014 and again when Kechiche made headlines for auctioning off his Palme d'Or to raise funds for his next project. *Blue* also was a ghostly presence at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, when jury member Seydoux

returned to the red carpet alongside eighty-one other women actors, filmmakers, and activists to protest the festival's long tradition of unbalanced gender representation and then appeared alongside the current Cannes directors to announce a pledge to achieve gender parity within the festival's ranks and to create a more transparent selection process.[4]

Blue is the work brought up most often, by people from all areas of my life, when I mention that I am writing a book on sexual provocation in contemporary screen media. (The other two names that consistently arise are Catherine Breillat and Lena Dunham, to whom this book's third chapter is devoted.) Clearly this says something about the taste profile of my acquaintanceship, but it also reveals much about the film's significance in the current cultural imaginary, being at once singular and paradigmatic of how sexual provocation acts as a driving force for making, selling, consuming, and appraising screen media in the 21st century. The film thus not only provides an apt entry into many of the zones of provocation I explore in this book but also offers an opportunity to reflect at the outset on my own investments in this book's writing. Like nearly every work I have written about in the course of my career studying screen media, this film holds considerable personal significance. More than any other intellectual figure, the much-missed Alexander Doty has been an essential model for my self-imagining as what he called a "scholar-fan," and I follow his lead in acknowledging, grappling with, and embracing the ways in which our personal enthusiasms and histories indelibly inform our critical output.[5]

This book's design has been, however unconsciously, motivated by works and creators I find simultaneously compelling and troubling, with *Blue* serving as an exemplary case for me as well as, evidently, the culture at large. Throughout, I have chosen as case studies texts and figures in which I have a deep-seated personal investment and ones that demonstrate considerable power to provoke—and whose provocations are of a primarily

sexual nature. What form that provocation takes, the degree to which it resonates aesthetically and politically, and for which segment(s) of the media audience vary widely. And yet this book attempts to be neither comprehensive nor canonical—thus, many provocations and provoc*auteurs* (as I name media creators for whom sexual provocation is a primary component of their works' themes and brand personae) prominent in the 21st century screen mediascape go unexplored here.[6] Thinking about provocation necessarily entails thinking about the ethical considerations involved both in practicing screen provocation and in writing about it. I heed film philosopher Mette Hjort's call for "a pragmatics of provocation that would allow us to reject certain artistic actions for reasons to do with willful ignorance, lack of understanding, and a failure to think consequentially about cause and effect relations in relation to the inflicting of damage, hurt, or harm." I approach the works here with an eye to determining, as Hjort encourages, whether "goals extending well beyond the individual seem to be at stake" and how coherently, responsibly, and effectively the project of provocation goes about achieving progressive ends for creators and viewers alike.[7]

A layout in the November 2013 issue of *Interview* magazine styled and posed Exarchopoulos and Seydoux to evoke the bohemian dishevelment and erotic languor that costars Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider made famous in *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), a film that led critic Jonathan Rosenbaum to observe that "sex could be regarded as the ultimate special effect."[8] Positioning *Blue* as the contemporary equivalent of *Last Tango* was a self-aggrandizing gesture that would acquire a darker meaning after Bertolucci, in a 2013 interview at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris, confirmed Schneider's earlier claims (while largely dismissing her concerns) that the film's simulated scene of anal intercourse was unscripted and nonconsensually imposed on her. The interview went viral in 2016 after actor Jessica Chastain and others disparaged the director's methods;

Chastain, in a tweet, labeled the incident "rape."[9] Bertolucci's inflammatory justification for not telling Schneider in advance what the scene would involve, "because I wanted her reaction as a girl, not as an actress," is echoed by Kechiche in the epigraph that begins this prologue.[10] What both directors describe attempting, and reportedly using manipulative means to achieve, was to capture some "real moment" of personal authenticity connected to sexual truth.

While this book elucidates how screen narrative and performance can bring us closer to understanding truths about erotic desire and intimacy, it accepts neither these filmmakers' assertions that such honest revelation can be achieved through duplicitous means, nor their conflation of mediated images with (as Kechiche says) "real moments of life." *Last Tango* offers a sobering example of a film's failure to abide by a "pragmatics of provocation," as Hjort sets out above. The personal harm inflicted outweighs any artistic value added or revelatory insight conveyed. It was (and continues to be) deeply troubling to read and hear Exarchopoulos's and Seydoux's accounts of Kechiche's demands and their having been made to feel (in Seydoux's wording) "like prostitutes." This, more than the form that the film's sexual representations take, is at the heart of my conflicted relation to *Blue*.[11] As the most prominent screen representation of lesbianism since *The L Word* (Ilene Chaiken, Showtime, 2005–9) and a gateway media work for queer youth, *Blue* is a landmark film that deserves to be considered on its merits. Rather than simply allow the film to be "soiled" (as Kechiche claims it has been for him), my analysis will call on our awareness of Kechiche's methods while reading the film as embodying its own self-critical aspects. Without minimizing concerns about the treatment of performers and crew that surrounded *Blue*, I feel grateful that Kechiche failed to prevent the film's release.

Blue presents a complicated entanglement of a kind that cinephiles—especially those with tastes toward the sexually

provocative—increasingly find themselves contending with. *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott, in a 2018 piece titled "My Woody Allen Problem," persuasively asserts the impossibility of separating art from artists, especially "when they carry intimate baggage into their work and invite us to sort through the contents." Though Kechiche poses a different set of dilemmas than does Allen, the path forward that Scott proposes fits in the case of *Blue*, as with any work or creator where questions of aesthetics and ethics are so complicatedly intertwined as to render inadequate a simple response of either exculpation or condemnation. Rather than excuse or expunge, we should instead reassess. As Scott remarks, "Reassessment is part of the ordinary work of culture, and in an extraordinary time, the work is especially vital and especially challenging."[12]

With its acquired taint of exploitation having overshadowed the film to the point of shaming the act of its screening (a prominent queer studies scholar all but apologized to me for having programmed it in an academic symposium on sexuality), the risk becomes that *Blue* will be shunned rather than reassessed. In initiating such a personal reassessment here, I argue that, for all its upsetting aspects, *Blue* remains an astounding work for its heartrending exploration of sexual awakening and first love as well as for its political call to action around LGBTQ+ rights (overlooked by those eager to condemn the film for what they saw as its universalist messaging). Additionally, the film offers a subtle (and thus also overlooked) probing of class difference, which acts as a structuring silence in both the tempestuous relationship at the film's heart and in the critical discourse around the film. And, finally, the film maintains a diegetic ambivalence about its own representational strategies. Because this last aspect of *Blue* suggests strategies for contending with its troubling elements, it is my focus here.

First, however, as a prelude to the detailed overview of this book's organization and methodology to follow in chapter 1, it is important to point out that *Blue* shares a great deal with other

instances of sexual provocation discussed in this book. Although Kechiche's reputation was already well established in France, *Blue* was his international breakout film, and its sexual explicitness and ability to generate controversy make it a prime example of the "millennial watercooler movie" explored in chapter 1. *Blue* links up with chapter 2's discussion of France's other *succès de scandale* from 2013, Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake*—a film whose production history yields a more ethically sound model for shooting explicit sex (and that did not elicit comparable public clamor over its content, as is discussed below). *Blue* serves as an illuminating counterpoint to two further forms of provocations taken up in chapter 2: that of male full-frontal nudity in mainstream media and that of gay male representation that withholds rather than reveals sexual imagery. For lesbian sex, the question seems to be how to screen it (with *Blue* perceived as transgressing lines of moderation and taste); for gay male sex, the question is whether to screen it at all.

Kechiche's crafting of sex scenes that simultaneously project documentary-style realism and alienating stylization will be reassessed in chapter 3's exploration of filmmaker Catherine Breillat. Though the nude female bodies graphically on display in *Blue* conform to the conventional beauty standards from which provoc*auteur* Lena Dunham's body type diverges, Kechiche films Exarchopoulos with an unflinching focus on her bodily fluids and appetites that parallels both Breillat's and Dunham's wallowing in what I term the corpo*realities* of women's bodies and desires. As a contested entry in the queer canon, owing to its cishet creator and its being disowned by Maroh amid charges of lesbian exploitation and inauthenticity, *Blue* raises issues further explored in chapter 4's assessment of what I name "bad queer" sexual and representational politics. Finally, *Blue*'s route from the Cannes Film Festival to the art house and multiplex, then to Criterion Collection DVD, Netflix streaming, lesbian film-streaming sites such as Buskfilms and One More Lesbian, and

even to porn sites such as Pornhub and YouPorn, exemplifies this book's thesis about the convergence of old and new media channels around the point of sexual provocation.

Before stories about the film's troubled production emerged, *Blue*'s sex scenes were under fire for reasons that are themselves worth reassessing. That critics and audiences seemed far more incensed over *Blue*'s Sapphic sex than over the comparably explicit depictions of gay male sex in *Stranger by the Lake* released that same year—albeit unrated in the United States and so with more limited distribution than *Blue*, which received an NC-17—leads Linda Williams to note the overwhelming and disproportionate degree to which lesbian sex scenes are judged by "whether one believes heterosexual men are getting off on it."[13] Indeed, concerns about "lesploitation" (lesbian sexuality presented primarily by and for the male gaze) generated as much controversy as those around cultural appropriation (a straight director adapting a queer graphic novel). *Blue*'s sex scenes superficially share elements with heterocentrist porn's "girl-on-girl" displays, and the prevalence of scissoring/frottage and the recurring use of "reverse cowgirl" positioning drew ire from viewers for their straight porn associations. Yet, as Williams also notes, those positions have ample precedent in lesbian-made porn. And their featured acts might have stemmed from these scenes' reported filming sans choreography and performed by women "not very familiar with lesbian sex" (as Exarchopoulos admits) and unwilling to more suggestively simulate cunnilingus (where Seydoux says she drew the line).[14] More significantly, however, these scenes are composed for suggestiveness rather than for the extreme visibility sought by heterocentric porn and so more closely resemble the art cinema mode Williams has named "hardcore eroticism" to suggest the mix of hard-core pornographic conventions and erotic suggestion created by strategies of "concealing erotic silhouettes, inferred fellation, inferred unprotected [vaginal and/or] anal penetration, and peaceful post-coital moments."[15]

These scenes dispense with the romanticizing gestures that have long defused the threat of Sapphic sex in Hollywood-style treatment. Their stark carnality, especially in a film otherwise devoted to intimate gestures and emotional fathoming, appears to have disconcerted viewers unprepared for a depiction of lesbian sex not as caressing but as fucking. *Blue* clearly declines to emulate examples from the lesbian cinema canon widely credited with feeling authentic and intimate without sacrificing their erotic charge, as in the case of two generally agreed to be among the "best": those in *Bound* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, 1996), on which lesbian "sexpert" Susie Bright consulted, and in the more recent *Duck Butter* (Miguel Arteta, 2018), on which Arteta deferred to co-writer/lead Alia Shawkat, co-lead Laia Costa, and cinematographer Hillary Spera's collaborative choices.[16]

Though Kechiche's camera holds intently on Exarchopoulos's face for sizable portions of *Blue*, the sex scenes wander from this privileging of facial intensity that queer women filmmakers including Desiree Akhavan (discussed in chap. 4) and Stacie Passon (*Concussion*, 2013) deploy to elicit intimacy and sidestep the perceptions of having ventured into fetishistic and pornographic terrain that dogged Kechiche. In her takedown of *Blue* in the *New York Times*, critic Manohla Dargis arraigns Kechiche on this discrepancy, noting that elsewhere he fixates in close-up on Adèle's voraciousness but "does not permit her a similarly sloppy appetite in bed, where the movie's carefully constructed realism is jettisoned along with bodily excesses and excretions in favor of tasteful, decorous poses." This claim that Adèle's "sloppiness" is quarantined from the sex scenes in favor of what Dargis describes as "contained, prettified, aestheticized" images deserves some reassessment, as do descriptions of the film as breaking from its realism when turning to the erotic.[17]

Revisiting these sex scenes reveals that they vary in accord with their location in the narrative trajectory. For example, the

Fig. P.1. *Blue Is the Warmest Color*'s infamous tableau of lesbian sex.

sex that Adèle and Emma have in the full flush of love and in Adèle's childhood bedroom after introducing Emma to her parents (under the guise of being a friend) focuses more intimately and innocently on their faces. Not surprisingly, since they resemble scenes from other films, these moments do not stand out as memorably (for Dargis or others) as do those that resist both Hollywood-style modes of representation and art film's customary integration of sex scenes into the diegetic and spatiotemporal fabric. Kechiche opts to cut to and away from sexual interludes abruptly and in medias res, occasionally employing jump cuts for added discontinuity, almost sealing these sequences off from the recognizable mise-en-scène and denying viewers the "post-coital repose" shots to which they are accustomed (see fig. P.1). Still, on closer examination, these tableaux are also narratively suggestive for showing sex at the emotionally waxing and waning stages of their relationship.

Taken together, the sex scenes stand out for their simultaneous strangeness (compared to norms of narrative cinema) and familiarity (in resembling porn); as such, they provoke an effect of the uncanny. The scenes' much-derided perception as "clinical" (or "surgical," according to Maroh) seems attributable to their being relatively brightly lit, statically shot, frontal (even slightly aerial)

compositions. The alienating effect is further enhanced by otherwise atypical elements: discomforting duration, the performers' rather grim countenance, and their occasionally tonally incongruous emitting of what *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane described as "a fusillade of cries and clutches, grabs and slaps."[18] The closest cousins to *Blue*'s sex scenes may well be those that have gone to similar extremes and elicit a comparable distancing effect, but in the pursuit of laughs. Examples can be found in the exhaustive array of positions enacted by gyrating puppets in *Team America: World Police* (Trey Parker, 2004), the equally limber contortions by amorous gymnasts in *The Bronze* (Bryan Buckley, 2014), and the tampon-extracting, toe-penetrating parody of *Blue* in the pilot episode of *Sally4Ever* (Julia Davis, HBO, 2018–).

What all this dissimilarity, incongruity, and disagreement point to, and what strikes me as most intriguing—and provocative—about *Blue*'s sex scenes, is their divergence both from representational codes for screening sex and from the formal strategies Kechiche employs elsewhere in *Blue*. The pertinent question about this alienation effect is less about Kechiche's intentions and more about the extent to which it is productive and powerful. In rendering sex strangely within the context of narrative cinema, these scenes force us into (self-)assessment regarding their purpose and pleasures.

Blue's sex scenes—specifically the six-minute-long "centerpiece"—recall Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974), which Dargis's review also mentions (and compares favorably to *Blue*). That film's final act features Akerman's unnamed character and a woman suggested to be an occasional girlfriend (played by Claire Wauthion) writhing naked in another scene of extreme duration (ten minutes), also frontally composed and statically shot at a remove, and with a similarly stark, discordant effect conveyed through the black-and-white cinematography and disembodied postsync sound (see fig. P.2). What has always seemed so compelling about this scene (and Akerman's work overall) is

Fig. P.2. Making sex strange: lesbian lovemaking subjected to Brechtian distancing in *Je Tu Il Elle*.

precisely its play between inviting and withholding intimacy to gesture at the simultaneously revealing and resistant properties of the representational image. This tension between seeing and knowing—and thus controlling—the figure(s) held by the gaze informs our understanding of the scopophilic impulse to visually objectify women and suggests Akerman's import for feminist film criticism. That Akerman's scene is celebrated for its elusive toying with spectatorial voyeurism while Kechiche's equivalent scenes are criticized as lacking intimacy and authenticity and for being visually exploitative speaks volumes about the shifting criteria for evaluating such images. Alongside Linda Williams's observation about the tendency to give primacy to straight men's presumed pleasure (or lack thereof), Akerman's being a woman as well as a lesbian and her presence as performer in the scene

all seem to validate her authorial strategies where Kechiche's are rendered suspect.

The different contexts of these two scenes are also relevant to how they have been received, with one occurring in an experimental work of the feminist avant-garde and the other in a comparatively commercial and mainstream French art film—however arbitrary or blurry that distinction proves. So while these markedly contrasting responses to scenes that share some features of stylization and affect are noteworthy, what is for Akerman a pervasive visual aesthetic (in *Je Tu Il Elle* and beyond) registers as a break with Kechiche's less stylized, more freewheeling approach elsewhere in *Blue*. Yet I would caution against the tendency (including my own) to exaggerate the characterization of *Blue*'s sex scenes as a departure from the film's "realism," with the analogy to Akerman again proving useful for what has been called her style's "hyperrealism"—a mode by which she documents the everyday with such pronounced fixation and duration as to render it strange.[19] It is this "making sex strange" through the amalgamation of representational codes of porn, experimentalism, and realism that impels spectators into a confrontation with their own pursuit of visual pleasure.

For Kechiche, a Tunisian immigrant who grew up in the Nice *banlieue* adjacent to (but a world away from) Cannes, further anxieties informed *Blue*'s turning of the male gaze of a cishet man of color onto two women of European extraction. The heteropatriarchal authority and cultural capital equipping Kechiche—who at the time of the film's release had come to be considered among the foremost contemporary French directors—were challenged by his dubious "right" (as a straight man) to tell this story and by his being of Arab origins working in a racially oppressive nation and industry. Though it was a lower-profile film, Kechiche noticeably did not receive comparable opprobrium for putting Cuban-born first-time actor Yahima Torres through the paces in her demanding role as the real-life enslaved figure Saartjie Baartman (known

as the Hottentot Venus) in his previous feature *Vénus Noire* (*Black Venus*, 2010). Instead, critics divided on whether the film was "abusing" its audience (as at least one critic alleged).[20] Those debates, primarily concerning Kechiche's formally inventive use of unrelenting, extreme close-ups, prefigure what the filmmaker provokes with *Blue*. As James S. Williams characterizes it, there is a dialogue "between those who commend Kechiche's attempt to force the viewer into submission so that we acknowledge our own capacity for spectatorial voyeurism, and those who regard such a strategy as complicit in the very objectification and abjection the film seeks to expose and decry."[21]

The salience of racial politics in *Blue*'s reception emerges particularly in comparison to the relatively muted response to the South Korean art film *Ah-ga-ssi* (*The Handmaiden*, Park Chan-wook, 2016), which was open to similar charges of co-optation by a cishet male filmmaker. It was "inspired by" Welsh novelist Sarah Waters's lesbian cult classic *Fingersmith* (2002) and features lesbian sex scenes of comparable duration and explicitness, and with a fondness similar to *Blue*'s for Sapphic sex tableaux filmed from above. Also premiering at Cannes, unrated in its American release, and with a 144-minute running time, *The Handmaiden* did roughly the same box office as *Blue* in the United States and its other foreign territories (and tripled *Blue*'s domestic total in its home market of South Korea, where it grossed $30 million). That it received but a fraction of the fevered outcry that greeted *Blue* could be due to any number of factors, including *Blue* having left audiences jaded to this particular form of provocation. But it bears noting that *The Handmaiden* did not elicit the same outrage or the same impulse to protect its women actors (if only from the leering male gaze), at least within its Euro-American reception and English-language critical response.

Blue's dense references to Western art's treatment of the female nude makes legible Kechiche's purposeful resistance to representational expectations and conventions (see fig. P.3). Writing about

Fig. P.3. Emma (Léa Seydoux) instructing Adèle (Adèle Exarchopoulos) on the historical art of the male gaze.

Kechiche's work pre-*Blue*, James S. Williams notes the filmmaker's aim to revise the *Beur* cinema tradition in which his career was incubated, signaled by the deliberate shift in Kechiche's interests "from a politics of representation to the (inter)textual and performative processes of cinema itself."[22] *Blue* invites our questioning of Kechiche's authorial control—both its obtrusive presence and its limits—as surely within its diegesis as it would ultimately do in the court of public opinion. By inserting elements of metacommentary not present in the graphic novel, Kechiche directs attention to the assertion of his gendered perspective and his shaping of the film's images and narrative.

Blue opens on a classroom discussion of Marivaux's *La vie de Marianne* (*The Life of Marianne*, 1731–41), to which the film's French title, *La vie d'Adèle*, alludes. The opening lines, "I am a woman. I tell my story," are spoken by an uncredited student called Saïda, whose name and appearance signal her to be of Arab descent. She is stopped by the male teacher (Philippe Potier), who instructs her, "'I am a woman' is a truth. Understand, Saïda? Start from there. You tell your story. It's a truth." With Adèle looking on, this exchange immediately signals that a narrative presented as being by a woman was in fact crafted by one man and subject to the interpretation of another, who "directs" the young woman

(of color)'s performance and understanding of it. The "truth" to which it refers is thereby put in question at the outset. After other students take turns at reading, the teacher ends by instructing the class to think about the story's theme of predestination in love. This theme reverberates in the scene soon thereafter in which Adèle and Emma lock eyes at a crosswalk, and it also prefigures Adèle's internal conflict between societal determination and the alternative voiced by Emma's later paraphrasing of Jean-Paul Sartre: "He said we can choose our lives."

In a party scene later in the film, after Emma and Adèle have become a couple, yet another domineering middle-aged man, Joachim (Stéphane Mercoyrol), directs a discussion, this time about the elusive nature of female pleasure and the challenge of its artistic representation. "For you, female orgasm is mystical?" Emma prompts him, smirking slightly. "I'm totally sure of it," he responds. "I'll never understand this because I am a man." Though Emma will later refer to him dreamily, telling Adèle, "He's extremely cultivated. A genius. He knows everything," his pompous holding forth invites us to view him more skeptically. The focus on social stratifications of class and race that permeate Kechiche's earlier work unfolds here along gendered and generational lines. The younger women artists who follow his words but stay largely silent are, though perhaps in thrall, also in need of his patronage. He is, we learn, the "biggest gallery owner in Lille," on whom it is important, Emma says, that Adèle "made a good impression." We next hear his reputation invoked once Emma has landed the coveted show he proffers and is voicing frustration about his exerting control over her work. She complains, "He has a problem with lesbians. There are things I don't want to tell him."

As with the teacher at the film's start, we are encouraged to imagine this ambivalently characterized figure as Kechiche's alter ego. Shortly thereafter another potential Kechiche stand-in appears. Samir (Salim Kechiouche) is a young French Arab actor (as Kechiche himself was at career's start) who probes a reticent

Adèle about her sexual experience with women before relating his own experience of being relegated to stereotypical roles of "terrorists and hijackers" in American film productions. By film's end, having tired of being typecast, he has quit acting. These easily recognizable alter egos importantly illuminate Kechiche's and invite our (self-)questioning of how vectors of gender, age, class, and race affect cultural capital and professional influence. That Kechiche's authorial identification is complexly bound up with these supporting characters as well as with Adèle (whose lower-middle-class background locates her as the "outsider" protagonist, a recurring character type in Kechiche's films that seems informed by his own immigrant perspective) further complicates his self-alignment with a less obvious auteur-surrogate: Emma.

Notably, both party discussions occur in front of a screen on which plays *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*, G. W. Pabst, 1929)—the Weimar classic about kept woman Lulu (Louise Brooks), whose flouting of sexual decorum comes to a head in the scene on display within *Blue*, one which is credited as the first lesbian dance sequence put on film. Adèle's dancing with Samir under Emma's watchful eye soon thereafter, and her later dance with a coworker with whom she will have the fling that will lead to her and Emma's breakup, suggest her projection alongside the wanton Lulu as a fallen woman in Emma's view. This projection is reinforced by Emma's sketching Adèle in a self-consciously debauched pose that, Linda Williams notes, recalls Édouard Manet's 1865 painting *Olympia* and is the film's only instance of full-frontal nudity (see fig. P.4).[23] That this is the moment, under Emma's gaze and direction, that Adèle is filmed most fetishistically—in a slow pan up her body that lingers over her entirely shaved pubis—presents Emma as yet another ambivalent stand-in for Kechiche. Curiously, the mise en abyme framing in the scene's next shot permits us to see that Emma has drawn Adèle wearing underpants where she has none, as if to offer her the modesty that the film denies her. The scene adds another

Fig. P.4. Adèle under Emma's gaze and direction, in a pose evoking Manet's *Olympia*.

troubling layer in preemptively displacing a straight male director's conflicted drives (and perhaps guilty conscience) onto his lesbian character, whose otherwise decent (if fickle) comportment turns ugly when Emma, impetuously exiling Adèle after she has admitted to acts of infidelity, administers slaps—ones Seydoux later reported that Kechiche demanded she not simulate.[24]

In both instances, Kechiche could be said to avail himself of a safe stand-in for his own impulses—whether unseemly leering or unconscionable abuse—in a manner that displaces and even romanticizes the bad behavior of his on-screen surrogate. In inviting his identification with the otherwise appealing Emma (whom the film has, up until this point, invited us to revere much as Adèle does), Kechiche avoids the troubling associations that Bertolucci invites with his own Brando-incarnating alter ego, the brutish Paul in *Last Tango in Paris*. At the same time, the French Arab Kechiche might be seen as shielding himself (and his film) from the hostile response that might well greet a male director from a racially minoritized group casting such an overtly desiring eye on white women. Bertolucci's whiteness allowed him to escape—for a time, anyway—the policing of the gaze in a way that a man of color could not. Nonetheless, though these scenes of leering and lashing diegetically implicate Emma, in light of

what has been revealed of his working methods, these scenes also stamp Kechiche as (perhaps uncharacteristically) self-knowing for suggesting that *Blue* is crucially a film about a young and naive woman's use by an older, more knowing and privileged artist who harshly casts her out when she no longer fits the idealized image that has endowed her with artistic value.

Much remains to unpack in the film's metacommentary on selling out and "whoring" (the epithet with which Emma violently expels Adèle, whom she suspects of sleeping around). Suffice it to say that, however (un)intentionally, *Blue* enfolds these questions of (lesbian) women's representation within the film's narrative as well as through its pictorial references to visual art with reflexive gestures that, as in James S. Williams's observation, tease out those "performative processes of cinema itself." Recalling Akerman's resistance to being fully seen or known, that Emma's portraiture of Adèle seems at best a superficial semblance and at worst a garish exoticization serves as a reminder that representation is inherently elusive or even intentionally distorting. "It's strange because it is me and it isn't," Adèle says upon seeing Emma's first sketch of her. Her remark prefigures one with which Emma will attempt to overcome Adèle's resistance to becoming a writer. Adèle says, "I can't expose my life to the world." "You can invent rather than expose," replies Emma, in another line that resounds with meaning around "the real moments of life" Kechiche demanded from his actors and the degree to which they submitted to his demand. Recall this chapter's epigraph, in which Exarchopoulos describes her realization that Kechiche wanted her to "give him *everything*."[25] Even as we are invited to register, most prominently in the final scene of Emma's gallery opening, how film affords a fleshing out of that which canvas cannot, Adèle's evident distance from (and discomfort against) the backdrop of her fantasied image spurs us to scrutinize Kechiche's own inventions alongside his methods.

Skadi Loist notes how *Blue* was promoted more as an art film than as (identity-driven) queer cinema to maximize its universalist

message for broad audience appeal.[26] Yet the film itself goes to pains (albeit subtly) to indicate how Adèle's experience of first love is distinctly colored by its being a lesbian relationship—from its blossoming in the marginalized and politicized queer spaces of gay bars and Pride parades to the bullying and ostracizing by her classmates and from her evasions to her family and their disappearance from the film after she moves in with Emma to her subsequent silence about Emma around her coworkers even as she is made to endure Emma's male pals' inquisitions into their love life.

Half a decade later, thanks significantly to its afterlife streaming on Netflix, *Blue* continues to resonate as a "first contact" film for queer and curious youth introduced to it algorithmically as an LGBTQ+ drama and perhaps without awareness of its "bad object" status (though because of Netflix's obfuscations around viewing numbers, this can only be anecdotally inferred). To judge from the reactions of my students, for whom the concept of the male gaze seems thoroughly inculcated, the film remains both deeply relatable and decidedly problematic for younger generations. Kechiche has fared less well in the public eye; after announcing he would be splitting his new project into two films of three hours apiece, planned distributor Pathé backed out, leading Kechiche to auction his Palme d'Or to help finance their completion. The first installment, the 185-minute *Mektoub, My Love: Canto Uno* (2017), was greeted with derision upon its premiere at the Venice Film Festival for what was described as its directorial self-indulgence and "masturbatory male gaze." Unrepentantly, Kechiche doubled down with the follow-up, 212-minute *Mektoub, My Love: Intermezzo*, which spurred walkouts at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival over its reported excesses, including a seemingly unsimulated cunnilingus scene nearly fifteen minutes long and so much unapologetic leering at the female form that one critic deemed it a "human rights violation."[27]

Ultimately, it seems, it is not *Blue* itself but its director who will suffer the fallout from the film's multiple controversies, which

will indelibly inform his authorial legacy as it has Bertolucci's. As Loist notes, "Without these sustained discussions, which have been perpetually rehashed during various release levels (staggered national releases as well as theatrical and DVD release), the film most likely would not have reached such wide distribution and total grossing revenue."[28] More than merely propelling its long-tail profitability, the scandals around *Blue* forced a reckoning with structural abuses on-set that has ushered in union-mandated standards overseen by "intimacy coordinators" charged with ensuring the safety and comfort of performers filming sex scenes.[29]

Perhaps more than any film since *Last Tango*—along with such contemporaries as *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972) and *Ai no korîda* (*In the Realm of the Senses*, Nagisa Ôshima, 1976)—*Blue* compelled media scholars and casual viewers alike to test their own expressed precepts around screening sex. Furthermore, it did those 1970s films one better by bringing sex between individuals of the same gender fully into that discussion. What makes one sex scene art and another pornography? Why are a sex scene's pleasures for some viewers governed by the responses of others? Why do we place such value on "realism" and "authenticity" in the representation of (especially queer) sex, particularly as we simultaneously insist on its being performative—whether out of protection of its performers or our own security in its classification as not-porn? These are hardly new questions, but they are ones that *Blue* reanimated and reframed from an innovative angle.

Linda Williams singles out for agreement a remark from critic Richard Corliss's review of *Blue* in which he suggests that the issue is not that the film presents an excessive amount of sex, but rather that "one might ask why there is so little in most other movies. Considering that sex is an activity almost everyone participates in and thinks about even more, it's startling and depressing to think about how few movies connect their characters' lives with their erotic drives."[30] Corliss's assessment helps explain the

aghast reactions to *Blue*'s sex scenes. Were it not so unusual in nonpornographic movies to see sex scenes of substantial length and verging on the (hyper)real, *Blue*'s would not stand out so markedly in a film that, after all, devotes comparable stretches of screen time to showing characters discussing literature, attending demonstrations, and devouring spaghetti.

Corliss's call also encompasses sex scenes that "connect" with characters' subjectivities and carry significant narrative meaning. Corliss thus echoes Williams's characterization of Hollywood-style sex scenes as "sanitized poses of decorous passion that last no longer than the length of a song—[and thus] effectively quarantine sex from the rest of the film. Sex, in such films, can never be a real part of what the films are about."[31] (But for their alienating qualities, in treating *Blue*'s sex scenes as at least somewhat formally distinct from the rest of the film, Kechiche might seem to effect the same.) Though to avoid screening sex for fear of its seeming excessive or lacking verisimilitude sells both reality and cinematic representation short. As Williams asserts in her seminal 2008 book *Screening Sex* (the scholarly work that most inspires my own), "Not to speak sex in the realistic way of which cinema alone is capable is to leave out an enormous chunk of human life."[32]

Together Corliss and Williams share the viewpoint that piques this book's explorations: that sexual provocation holds the potential to stimulate both screen representation and reception, and that its elision or eradication from the screen restrains this uncannily representative medium's power to (re)shape our sexual imaginaries in productive (as well as pleasurable) ways. As the film critic Ann Hornaday recently inquired, lamenting the paucity of sex scenes in the wake of #MeToo, "Is abstinence really our only option?"[33] Though his unsavory methods are not to be condoned, Kechiche succeeded alongside Exarchopoulos and Seydoux, "also the directors of the film," in creating within *Blue* images of eroticism that would touch off a cultural conversation

as riveting, vexing, and affectively charged as the film itself. As chapter 1 will take up, the questions of sex and its representation brought to prominence by mediatized scandals such as the one that surrounded *Blue* have the potential to be put to creatively and politically generative ends, as our post-#MeToo era illustrates.

NOTES

1. The Steven Spielberg–led jury's decision was announced by the festival's then director Gilles Jacob. Maroh characterized the film's sex scenes as "a brutal and surgical display, exuberant and cold, of so-called lesbian sex, which turned into porn." Quoted in Linda Williams, "Cinema's Sex Acts," *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2014): 9. Kechiche quoted in Kevin Jagernauth, "'Blue Is the Warmest Color' Director Says the Film Shouldn't Be Released and He Thought of Replacing Léa Seydoux," *Indiewire*, September 24, 2013, http://www.indiewire.com/2013/09/blue-is-the-warmest-color-director-says-the-film-shouldnt-be-released-he-thought-of-replacing-lea-seydoux-93327/. Among the concerns voiced about Kechiche's production methods were reports by the French crew's union representation of deplorable working conditions and of the filmmaker's penchant for verbal abuse and endless takes. Exarchopoulos and Seydoux reported its taking ten days to shoot the sex scenes (which comprise roughly ten minutes of screen time). Adèle Exarchopoulos and Léa Seydoux, "The Stars of 'Blue Is the Warmest Color' on the Riveting Lesbian Love Story," interview by Marlow Stern, *Daily Beast*, September 1, 2013, http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-stars-of-blue-is-the-warmest-color-on-the-riveting-lesbian-love-story. While it has been alleged that Exarchopoulos was underage during filming, I can find no substantiated report of this. According to the Internet Movie Database, during the film's production in the spring and summer of 2012, Exarchopoulos was eighteen, the legal age of majority in the European Union.

2. Box office reporting here and throughout this book are taken from Box Office Mojo. Though an NC-17 rating is typically a deterrent for theater chains, Cinemark broke with its historical policy against screening NC-17 titles to book the film (perhaps as a mea culpa for the company's support of California's anti–marriage equality legislation Proposition 8, which resulted in a boycott of the company in 2008), and New York's IFC Center announced it would grant admission to high school–aged patrons.

Blue Is the Warmest Color was determined to be ineligible for an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film because it opened in its home country after the stipulated September deadline.

3. B. Ruby Rich, "*Blue Is the Warmest Color*: Feeling *Blue*," Criterion Collection, February 24, 2014, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3072-blue-is-the-warmest-color-feeling-blue. #BalanceTonPorc ("squeal on your pig") is France's equivalent of the US-based #MeToo solidarity movement, both of which work to denounce sexual harassment and assault. Time's Up is a coalition formed by Hollywood actors to support those seeking justice against sexual harassment and assault in the workplace and to promote gender parity in the entertainment industry.

4. The red carpet protest was organized by groups campaigning under the banner #5050x2020, which calls for gender parity in the French film industry by 2020. The 82 participants signified the number of films by women filmmakers that have screened in the festival's 71-year history (in contrast with 1,645 films by male filmmakers).

5. See Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–21.

6. In formulating the gender-neutral term provoc*auteur* by combining *auteur* and *provocateur*, I elect to use the grammatically masculine form for familiarity (the feminine forms are rarely used) and gender parity (as with *actor*, thought to be preferable to *actress*).

7. Mette Hjort, "The Problem with Provocation: On Lars von Trier, Enfant Terrible of Danish Art Film," *Kinema: A Journal of Film and Audiovisual Media*, 2011, https://doi.org/10.15353/kinema.vi.1236.

8. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Real Sex in Movies," October 5, 2018, https://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2018/10/real-sex-in-movies/. The *Interview* spread was designed by Karl Templer and photographed by Mikael Jansson. See Zoã Wolff, "Léa and Adèle," *Interview*, November 2013, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/lea-seydoux-adele-exarchopoulos.

9. Chastain tweeted the following response to Bertolucci's interview: "To all the people that love this film- you're watching a 19yr old get raped by a 48yr old man. The director planned her attack. I feel sick." @jes_chastain, Twitter post, December 3, 2016, 3:32 a.m., https://twitter.com/jes_chastain/status/804966641998168064. Chastain was likely responding to Schneider's remark in a 2007 interview that, while the film's sex was simulated, "I felt humiliated and to be honest, I felt a little raped, both by Marlon and by Bertolucci." Schneider quoted in Lina Das, "I Felt Raped

by Brando," *Daily Mail* (UK), July 19, 2007, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-469646/I-felt-raped-Brando.html.

10. Bernardo Bertolucci, "Bertolucci par Bertolucci," conversation moderated by Serge Toubiana and Jean-François Rauger, *Leçon de cinéma*, Cinémathèque Française, Paris, September 14, 2013, video, 1:57:53. https://www.canal-u.tv/video/cinematheque_francaise/lecon_de_cinema_bertolucci_par_bertolucci.13144. Kechiche quoted in Jonathan Romney, "Women in Love," *Sight and Sound* (December 2013): 41.

11. Seydoux quoted in Kaleem Aftab, "*Blue Is the Warmest Colour* Actresses on Their Lesbian Sex Scenes: 'We Felt Like Prostitutes,'" *Independent* (London), October 4, 2013, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/blue-is-the-warmest-colour-actresses-on-their-lesbian-sex-scenes-we-felt-like-prostitutes-8856909.html.

12. A. O. Scott, "My Woody Allen Problem," *New York Times*, January 31, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/movies/woody-allen.html.

13. L. Williams, "Cinema's Sex Acts," 23.

14. Ibid., 10. Exarchopoulos quoted in Exarchopoulos and Seydoux, "The Stars of 'Blue Is the Warmest Color.'" For the sex scenes, the actors wore prosthetic vaginas (what Seydoux termed "fake pussies"), molded in silicone cast from their bodies. Aftab, "*Blue Is the Warmest Colour* Actresses."

15. L. Williams, "Cinema's Sex Acts," 10, 15, 18.

16. Jude Dry, "Alia Shawkat Made 'Duck Butter' Queer after Male Actors 'Seemed Uncomfortable' with Intimate Sex Scenes," *Indiewire*, April 27, 2018, https://www.indiewire.com/2018/04/duck-butter-alia-shawkat-lesbian-sex-scenes-1201957653/.

17. Manohla Dargis, "Seeing You Seeing Me: The Trouble with 'Blue Is the Warmest Color,'" *New York Times*, October 25, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/movies/the-trouble-with-blue-is-the-warmest-color.html.

18. Anthony Lane, "New Love," *New Yorker*, October 28, 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/28/new-love.

19. See Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

20. Quoted in James S. Williams, "Re-siting the Republic: Abdellatif Kechiche and the Politics of Reappropriation and Renewal," in *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 225. Torres reports that while it was a grueling shoot, she felt protected and made comfortable by Kechiche. See Pamela Messi,

"Yahima Torres Talks about Her Role as Sarah Baartman in the Film by Abdellatif Kechiche," *African Women in Cinema*, November 7, 2010, https://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2010/11/yahima-torres-talks-about-her-role-as.html.

21. J. S. Williams, "Re-Siting the Republic," 225.

22. Ibid., 188. *Beur* cinema takes its name from French slang for "Arab" and refers to films made by French filmmakers of North African origin.

23. L. Williams, "Cinema's Sex Acts," 14.

24. Exarchopoulos and Seydoux, "The Stars of 'Blue Is the Warmest Color.'"

25. Ibid.; emphasis in original.

26. See Skadi Loist, "Crossover Dreams: Global Circulation of Queer Film on the Film Festival Circuits," *Diogenes*, November 7, 2016, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192115667014.

27. Zack Sharf, "'Mektoub My Love' First Reactions Enraged by 'Blue Is the Warmest Color' Director's 'Masturbatory' Male Gaze," *Indiewire*, September 7, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/2017/09/mektoub-my-love-reviews-male-gaze-abdellatif-kechiche-1201873810/. Caroline Tsai, "'Mektoub, My Love: Intermezzo': Abdellatif Kechiche's Torturous, Four-Hour Sequel Is the Butt of the Joke [Cannes Review]," *The Playlist*, May 24, 2019, https://theplaylist.net/mektoub-my-love-intermezzo-cannes-review-20190524/.

28. Loist, "Crossover Dreams," 11.

29. Tambay Obenson, "SAG-AFTRA Issues New Rules for Sex Scenes with 'Intimacy Coordinators,'" *Indiewire*, January 29, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/2020/01/sag-aftra-intimacy-coordinators-1202206891/. See also Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, "How to Make Sex Scenes Natural and Nonthreatening? Cue the 'Intimacy Coordinator,'" *New York Times*, January 22, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/arts/movie-sex-scenes-safety-intimacy-coordinator.html; and Lizzie Feidelson, "The Sex Scene Evolves for the #MeToo Era," *New York Times*, January 14, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/14/magazine/sex-scene-intimacy-coordinator.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_200119?campaign_id=2&instance_id=15176&segment_id=20459&user_id=659d4416c49fb088c697ae5b351de3af&regi_id=69986400119.

30. Quoted in L. Williams, "Cinema's Sex Acts," 10.

31. Ibid., 23.

32. Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 266.

33. Ann Hornaday, "Sex Is Disappearing from the Big Screen, and It's Making Movies Less Pleasurable," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2009, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/sex-is-disappearing-from-the-big-screen-and-its-making-movies-less-pleasurable/2019/06/06/37848090-82ed-11e9-933d-7501070ee669_story.html?utm_term=.8d9441e694d5.